

Soldiers receive hero's welcome

Acting Gov. Codey, Sen. Corzine thank troop for their sacrifice

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PFC Jamar Shackleford of Galloway, kisses his daughter Alexis, 3, during the ceremony. Shackleford and other members of the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry have been deployed for the past six months.

A homecoming of speeches, food and bagpipers greeted a New Jersey Army National Guard unit that spent six months on the Sinai Peninsula in support of the war in Iraq.

More than 325 members of the 1st Battalion, 114th Infantry, received a hero's welcome Saturday during a ceremony filled with pageantry and celebration.

"It feels good," said First Lt. Christopher Lawson, 37, of Trenton. "Me and my family are heading to Florida on Monday. I'm going to take my kids to Disney World."

He said while in the Middle East, he missed his wife, Lorraine, and their children — Cameron, 8, and Chrystal, 5. Welcoming the troops home were acting Gov. Codey and U.S. Sen. Jon S. Corzine, D-N.J., both of whom praised them for their service and dedication.

"In putting your lives on the line overseas for our freedom, you have shown more courage and commitment than most Americans will ever be asked to show," Codey told the troops and their relatives and friends. "Your families also sacrifice for your country in ways that are often unrecognized."

Every American owes you — families and soldiers — so much," Codey said. "All of us are proud of you," Corzine said. "You have served our nation well. You have served our state well, and we thank you. We are proud to have you home safe and sound. God bless you!"

The 114th Infantry has headquarters in Woodbury, with units in Mount Holly, Burlington City and Freehold. Its mission was to man observation points on the Sinai Peninsula on the Red Sea, between Egypt and Israel. While overseas, the battalion became the first Army National Guard unit to win the Multinational Forces and Observers Force Skill Competition, which tests soldiers' skill against their peers from other nations.

Ten of the unit's soldiers were presented with an Army Commendation medal for their performance in the contest. Five other soldiers were awarded the Meritorious Service Medal for "exceptional performance" while deployed. They are: Lt. Col. Tommie Bellamy; Maj. Joseph Boucher; Command Sgt. Maj. Stephen Emery; Sgt. 1st Class Michael Warner and Capt. James Zozzaro.